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# Crossing Northern Iowa

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## Crossing Northern Iowa

The McGregor Western Railway originally intended building across northern Iowa along or near the 43rd Parallel and thereby secure valuable land grants. But progress was so slow the road never received any of the government land.

A new company called the McGregor & Sioux City Railway (incorporated January 23, 1868) entered the picture to resume construction and get the grant. It built from Calmar to Nora Springs, a distance of sixty-four miles, by 1869. The carrier was renamed the McGregor & Missouri River Railway; and, by 1870, when it reached Algona, its mileage had about doubled. It received land grants up to that point only to have further progress halted by adverse business conditions and the panic of 1873. To qualify for the entire grant, the road had to reach the line of the St. Paul & Sioux City Railroad in O'Brien County. But when the land grant expired in December, 1875, the track was scarcely more than half way across the state.

Meanwhile, the McGregor & Missouri River had been absorbed by the expanding Milwaukee & St. Paul system, with which it was associated from the start. Naturally the Milwaukee wanted to have the land grant transferred to it as an in-



centive to build the rest of the line in Iowa and on to Dakota. At this juncture there was strong political pressure against extending the grant. Equally significant was the fact that Iowa's home railroad, the energetic Burlington, Cedar Rapids & Northern, was pushing its line through the northwestern part of the state to Dakota. Its hat was in the ring for the forfeited lands. The battle was long and bitter, but in the end the Milwaukee won.

Since the Milwaukee & St. Paul became the Chicago, Milwaukee & St. Paul Railway in 1874, it was the latter company which actually completed the extension westward. The segment from Algona through Sheldon (where it crossed the St. Paul & Sioux City Railroad) to Hull was in operation by 1878. The next year saw trains crossing the Big Sioux River into Canton, Dakota Territory.

While the Milwaukee completed its line in time to qualify for the land grant, a change in route of the St. Paul & Sioux City (now the North Western) resulted in overlapping grants. This in turn gave rise to years of litigation in which the Federal Government, the state, the two railroads, and the "Grangers" took part.

Because of the sparsely settled nature of northern Iowa, comparatively few branches were built by Milwaukee interests. The trans-Iowa line was, in truth, more of a gateway to the Dakota Territory than anything else. The Milwaukee and the North Western vied with each other in opening up



to settlers what is now South Dakota. Indeed, Frank H. Spearman in his *The Strategy of Great Railroads* pointed out that the Milwaukee "has exploited South Dakota so long and so earnestly that it has come to be looked on by the State administration as a sort of advertising adjunct to its own and is accorded, after a manner, official recognition."

There were, however, some branches, the oldest of which was built from Conover to Decorah by the Milwaukee & St. Paul in 1869. The next year the Mason City & Minnesota Railway built a 28-mile line from the city in its title to the Minnesota border. An affiliated road continued the rails to Austin, Minnesota, where they met the trunk line linking the Twin Cities with the East.

In 1882, the Milwaukee acquired the picturesque little Iowa Eastern Railroad, connecting Beulah with Elkader. The 19-mile road, chartered in 1872, was of 3-foot gauge. For many years, William Larrabee was active in its management. Its two beautiful Mogul (2-6-0) locomotives, the *Pathfinder* and *Diamond Joe*, are said to have been the first of that wheel arrangement west of the Mississippi River. The line was also unusual in that it had iron-plated wooden rails, commonly called "strap rails," on about four miles of route in the vicinity of Elkader. These composite rails caused trouble, especially in very cold weather when the iron straps would curl up and derail trains.



Operating in rugged, hilly country, the short line was subject to bad washouts, one of which ripped out the track between Elkader and Stulta causing that end of the line to be abandoned. After purchase by the Milwaukee, the road was widened to standard gauge, and the 4-mile Elkader-Stulta section was rebuilt.

At the western end of the state, the Milwaukee built the 9-mile Rock Valley-Hudson (South Dakota) cutoff in 1880. This reduced the time of trains running from Sioux City to the East when the railroad entered the latter city only from the north.

Since the Canton and Sioux City line weaves in and out of Iowa and South Dakota, a brief history of it is in order. The stretch from Sioux City to Elk Point, South Dakota, was built by the Dakota Southern Railroad in 1872. The road from the latter community north along the Big Sioux River was the responsibility of the Sioux City & Pembina Railway. It built from Elk Point to Calliope in 1876, and to Canton in 1878. After a series of consolidations all these lines became the property of the Milwaukee by 1881.

The rivalry between the Burlington, Cedar Rapids & Northern and the Milwaukee in northwestern Iowa was intense and led to classic right-of-way fights and to the construction of one ill-fated branch. When the BCR&N wanted to cross the Milwaukee's main line at Emmetsburg in building



up to Estherville, it had to do so by force. The road waited until Sunday, when injunctions could not be issued, and with a crew of men ripped up the Milwaukee track and put in its own crossing frogs. Mustering up its own force a few days later, the Milwaukee tore out the crossing and kept a string of freight cars on the disputed territory. When a train appeared, the cars were sidetracked to let it pass and then quickly returned to the crossing. The inevitable court battle followed in which the BCR&N won the right to cross.

Alarmed by this incursion and still trying to keep what it regarded as an intruder out of its territory, the Milwaukee, under S. S. Merrill's supervision, commenced its own line to Estherville. Merrill, it is said, aspired to extend the road through Jackson and Crookston, Minnesota, and thence to Winnipeg.

Soon the two roads were building side by side northward from Emmetsburg. At the town of Osgood, the BCR&N was to cross to the east side of the Milwaukee's line. When they got there, they found their rival on the spot with an engine blocking the track where they had to cross. The steam bulwark remained there until removed by a court injunction. Both roads then resumed the race, which ended with the Milwaukee reaching Estherville a day or two before its competitor. But the winner in 1882 proved to be the loser in 1889, for the Milwaukee, after operating the line at a heavy



loss, abandoned it. Today one can still see the old grade to the east of the present Rock Island line — a mute reminder of crossing fights and unfulfilled dreams.

The Milwaukee fared better when it built from Spencer to Okoboji to tap the largest lakes in Iowa and share that resort area with the Burlington, Cedar Rapids & Northern. The 17-mile branch was opened in 1882, and the following year it was extended another three miles to Spirit Lake. Shortly afterward both roads had hotels beside the lakes and boats with cruising vacationists on their waters. The two railroads soon made the Okoboji-Spirit Lake area a popular watering place for Iowans; a role which is largely forgotten in this day when the automobile has put the locale within a few hours' drive for everyone in the state.